

Albert Einstein: *Time* Magazine's Undeserving Person of the Century

[John Wear](#)

In 1999 Albert Einstein was named *Time* Magazine's person of the 20th century.[\[1\]](#) This article will discuss whether Einstein deserved this award.

Physicist

Albert Einstein is regarded by many people as the greatest physicist of the 20th century.[\[2\]](#) His unique contributions are said to have revolutionized physics.

However, many physicists dispute the revolutionary nature of Einstein's discoveries. Physicist Frank J. Tipler writes:

Most physicists now recognize that Einstein's theory of relativity is not a revolutionary theory at all but a completion of classical physics. Einstein's most subtle biographer, Abraham Pais, has conceded this, but also maintained that Einstein's invention of quantum mechanics, in his 1905 paper on the photoelectric effect, was still revolutionary.

I disagree. Einstein's invention of quantum mechanics was, once again, a conservative innovation—conservative in the traditional sense of preserving the classical structure of Newtonian physics.”[\[3\]](#)

Christopher Jon Bjerknes accuses Einstein of plagiarism. Bjerknes writes:

Many people knew that Einstein did not hold priority for much of what he wrote. He, himself, was keenly aware of it. It is not uncommon for grandiose myths to accrue to overly idealized popular figures, such as Albert Einstein. Theoretical Physics, as a field, was small, and not well known in the period from 1905-1919. Theoretical physicists were not well known, and, since those in the field knew that Einstein was a plagiarist, they largely ignored him...

Einstein evinced a career-long pattern of publishing “novel” theories and formulae after others had already published similar words, then claimed priority for himself. He did it with $E = mc^2$. He did it with the so-called special theory of relativity and he did it with the general theory of relativity.[\[4\]](#)

While I don't understand physics well enough to know if Bjerknes's analysis is accurate, it is certain that many physicists had little regard for Einstein in his later years. Robert Oppenheimer, for example, visited the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in January 1935. In a letter to his brother Frank, Oppenheimer conveyed his reaction to the occupants of Fine Hall at Princeton: “Princeton is a madhouse: its solipsistic luminaries shining in separate & helpless desolation. Einstein is completely cuckoo...”[\[5\]](#)

Oppenheimer also said in private that Einstein had no understanding of or interest in modern physics, and that Einstein had been wasting his time trying to unify gravitation and electromagnetism.[\[6\]](#)

Physicist Freeman Dyson was a colleague of Einstein's from 1948 to 1955 at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Dyson had a strong desire to meet and know Einstein when he arrived at the Institute. However, after reading Einstein's recent scientific papers, Dyson decided they were junk.

Dyson spent the next seven years avoiding Einstein so that he would not have to tell Einstein his work was junk.[\[7\]](#)

Physicist David Bodanis writes about Einstein's later years: "Einstein's peers regarded him as a has-been. Even many of his closest friends no longer took his ideas seriously."[\[8\]](#)

Einstein Supported Zionism

In an article published in the November 26, 1938 edition of *Collier's* magazine, Albert Einstein explained how the social creed and morality inbred in most Jews, which he attempted to live by, was part of a long and proud tradition. Einstein wrote: "The bond that has united the Jews for thousands of years and that unites them today is, above all, the democratic ideal of social justice coupled with the ideal of mutual aid and tolerance among all men."[\[9\]](#) Einstein later wrote that Karl Marx lived and sacrificed himself for the ideal of social justice.[\[10\]](#)

Einstein wrote about the Jewish tradition: "The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence—these are the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it."[\[11\]](#)

Einstein came to embrace the cause of Zionism. He wrote to a friend in October 1919: "One can be an internationalist without being indifferent to members of one's tribe. The Zionist cause is very close to my heart...I am glad that there should be a little patch of earth on which our kindred brethren are not considered aliens." Einstein further declared: "I am, as a human being, an opponent of nationalism. But as a Jew, I am from today a supporter of the Zionist effort."[\[12\]](#)

Einstein worked hard to promote Zionism and to establish the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He wrote to German/Jewish chemist Fritz Haber:

Despite my emphatic internationalist beliefs, I have always felt an obligation to stand up for my persecuted and morally oppressed tribal companions. The prospect of establishing a Jewish university fills me with particular joy, having recently seen countless instances of perfidious and uncharitable treatment of splendid young Jews with attempts to deny their chances of education.[\[13\]](#)

Einstein traveled to America, Singapore and other places to help secure funding for Hebrew University.[\[14\]](#)

Einstein was an enthusiastic supporter of Israel. He wrote after Israel was founded:

In this hour one thing, above all, must be emphasized: Judaism owes a great debt of gratitude to Zionism. The Zionist movement has revived among Jews the sense of community. It has performed productive work surpassing all the expectations any one could entertain. This productive work in Palestine, to which self-sacrificing Jews throughout the world have contributed, has saved a large number of our brethren from direct need. In particular, it has been possible to lead a not inconsiderable part of our youth toward a life of joyous and creative work.

Now the fateful disease of our time—exaggerated nationalism, borne up by blind hatred—has brought our work to a most difficult stage. Fields cultivated by day must have armed protection at night against fanatical Arab outlaws. All economic life suffers from insecurity.[\[15\]](#)

Einstein ignored in this writing that Israel was formed through the ethnic cleaning of approximately 750,000 Palestinians who were ruthlessly expelled from their homes. Entire cities and hundreds of villages in Israel were left empty and repopulated with new Jewish immigrants. The Palestinians lost everything they had and became destitute refugees, while the Jewish immigrants stole the Palestinians' property and confiscated everything they needed. [16] This is why the "fanatical Arab outlaws" Einstein referred to arose to counteract these illegal Zionist actions.

Einstein also praised the great and lasting contributions of Rabbi Stephen Wise to the cause of Zionism. Einstein wrote about Wise: "There are those who do not love him, but there is no one who has ever denied him recognition and respect, for everybody knows that behind the enormous labors of this man there has always been the passionate desire to make mankind better and happier." [17]

Einstein was even invited by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion on November 16, 1952 to become President of Israel if elected by the Parliament. Einstein turned down this offer because the Presidential office required an understanding of human relations—something Einstein felt he was deficient in. Einstein wanted to deal only with science and nature. [18]

Einstein Hated Germans

Albert Einstein hated the German people. Einstein wrote to an old Jewish friend in the summer of 1942: "Due to their wretched traditions the Germans are such a badly messed-up people that it will be very difficult to remedy the situation by sensible, not to speak of humane, means. I keep hoping that at the end of the war, with God's benevolent help, they will largely kill each other off." [19]

In a tribute "To the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto," Einstein wrote in 1944 that the Germans "deliberately used the humanity of others to make preparation for their last and most grievous crime against humanity." Einstein held the German people responsible for electing Adolf Hitler and acquiescing in what Einstein felt was Hitler's unutterable crimes. He could not find forgiveness in his heart for such "calculated moral degradation." [20]

Einstein believed in the official Holocaust story [21], and his hatred of Germans continued after the war. Jamie Sayen writes:

Personally, he could not bring himself to forgive the Germans for the crimes of the Nazis and he rejected all reconciliatory efforts. In 1951 President Theodor Heuss of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) invited Einstein to join the Peace Section of the old Prussian order Pour le mérite. Einstein had been a member prior to 1933 but, in accordance with his postwar refusal to be associated publicly with any German organization he declined Heuss's invitation. "Because of the mass murder which the Germans inflicted upon the Jewish people," he explained, "it is evident that a self-respecting Jew could not possibly wish to be associated in any way with any official German institution." [22]

Einstein was convinced that militarism was so deeply ingrained in the spirit of the German people that world peace was not possible while Germany possessed an army. He thought the Germans could not learn through experience because they always managed to rationalize their failures with irrational explanations. Einstein warned a woman about Germans after the war: "You will find them affable, intelligent, and they will seem to agree with you, but you must not believe a one of them." [23]

Einstein supported the Morgenthau Plan and wanted to see Germany transformed from an industrial nation into an agricultural country. He wrote to his Jewish friend James Franck: “I am firmly convinced that it is absolutely indispensable to prevent the restoration of German industrial power for many years...I firmly object to any attempt from Jewish quarters to reawaken the kind of soft sentimental feelings which permitted Germany to prepare a war of aggression without any interference on the part of the rest of the world—and this long before the Nazis came to power...” [24]

Einstein would not even permit his books to be sold in Germany after the war. Einstein wrote to German chemist Otto Hahn: “The crimes of the Germans are really the most abominable ever to be recorded in the history of the so-called civilized nations. The conduct of the German intellectuals—viewed as a class—was no better than that of the mob.” [25] Einstein also protested the American use of German scientists after the war to help in the “war on communism.” [26]

Einstein’s national and tribal kinship became starkly clear in his own mind as World War II ended. He wrote: “I am not a German but a Jew by nationality.” [27] In a letter dated October 12, 1953 to Jewish physicist Max Born, Einstein referred to Germany as the “land of the mass-murderers of our kinsmen.” [28] This was Einstein’s opinion, and he never deviated from it. [29]

Alleged Pacifist

Albert Einstein decided to live in the United States and not return to Germany after Hitler obtained power. He said in a widely reported public statement: “As long as I have any choice in the matter, I shall live only in a country where civil liberty, tolerance, and equality of all citizens before the law prevail...These conditions do not exist in Germany at the present time.” [30]

Einstein felt close to the American Friends of Peace and regarded himself as a pacifist. However, his emphasis shifted toward ensuring peace “through the creation of an international organization embracing all major states...with a sufficiently strong executive power at its disposal.” Einstein thought a world government was the best defense against fascism. [31]

Einstein’s deep distrust of Germany caused him to forsake his alleged pacifism. Jürgen Neffe writes:

He imagined the country “Barbaria” capable of anything. A “uranium bomb” in the hands of Germans would be like an “axe in the hands of a pathological criminal.” He had not forgotten how consistently the Germans had adapted scientific achievements in employing poison gas for military purposes in World War I under the leadership of his friend Fritz Haber. He declared on the spot that he was prepared to go to the top level of the administration to warn of the danger. [32]

Einstein wrote a letter in conjunction with physicists Edward Teller and Leo Szilard that President Roosevelt received on October 3, 1939. This letter warned of the possibility that an atomic bomb using uranium might be built. On March 7, 1940, Einstein followed up with a more-urgent second letter to Roosevelt which stated: “Since the outbreak of war, interest in uranium has intensified in Germany. I have now learned that research there is carried out in great secrecy and that it has been extended to another of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes, the Institute of Physics.” [33]

The fact that two atomic bombs later hit Japan and not Germany was in Einstein’s view a great catastrophe. Germany was the only country against which Einstein would have condoned using the atomic bomb. Any degree of force was acceptable to Einstein to defeat Germany—even the atomic

bomb, even war to achieve peace. After Germany's defeat, which Einstein regarded as a necessary conquest of the Germans collectively embroiled in guilt, the use of the atomic bomb was no longer justified.[\[34\]](#)

Einstein returned to his alleged pacifism after World War II. Since the only justifiable war—the one against the Nazis—had ended, Einstein felt obliged more than ever to voice his advocacy for world peace.[\[35\]](#)

Conclusion

Einstein was selected as *Time* magazine's person of the 20th century primarily because of his contributions to physics early in his career.[\[36\]](#) Many physicists, however, had little regard for Einstein as a physicist in the later part of his career. Also, several quantum physicists made major contributions to the advancement of physics and were as qualified as Einstein to be selected for *Time* magazine's award.

Einstein made repeated racist statements about Germans while extolling the virtues of his Jewish tribe. With the exception of a few German scientists, Einstein considered all non-Jewish Germans to be a bad breed and referred to Germans as “the blond beast.”[\[37\]](#) Einstein had hoped at the end of World War II that the Germans, with God's benevolent help, would largely kill each other off. Einstein's statements about Germans were deeply racist, yet *Time* magazine ignored Einstein's racism and chose him to be its person of the 20th century.

Albert Einstein did not deserve *Time* Magazine's award. The mass media has promoted Einstein into an almost God-like figure. Christopher Jon Bjerknes writes:

It appears that the physics community and the media invented a comic book figure, “Einstein”, with “E=mc²” stenciled across his chest. The media and educational institutions portray this surreal and farcical image as a benevolent god to watch over us...

To question “Einstein”, the god, either “his” theories, or the priority of the thoughts he repeated, has become the sin of heresy. “His” writings are synonymous with truth, the undecipherable truth of a god hung on the wall as a symbol of ultimate truth, which truth is elusive to mortal man—no one is to understand or to question the arcana of “Einstein”, but must let the shepherd lead his flock, without objection. Do not bother the believers with the facts![\[38\]](#)

Notes

[\[1\]](#) Lacayo, Richard, *Albert Einstein: The Enduring Legacy of a Modern Genius*, New York: Time Home Entertainment, 2011, p. 8.

[\[2\]](#) Fölsing, Albrecht, *Albert Einstein: A Biography*, New York: Viking, 1997, p. xi.

[\[3\]](#) Brockman, John (editor), *My Einstein: Essays by Twenty-four of the World's Leading Thinkers on the Man, His Work, and His Legacy*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2006, p. 80.

[\[4\]](#) Bjerknes, Christopher Jon, *Albert Einstein: The Incurable Plagiarist*, Downers Grove, Ill.: XTX Inc., 2002, pp. 158, 234.

- [5] Schweber, Silvan S., *Einstein & Oppenheimer: The Meaning of Genius*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 265.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 276.
- [7] Brockman, John (editor), *My Einstein: Essays by Twenty-four of the World's Leading Thinkers on the Man, His Work, and His Legacy*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2006, pp. 110-111.
- [8] Bodanis, David, *Einstein's Greatest Mistake: A Biography*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016, p. xii.
- [9] Isaacson, Walter, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007, pp. 445, 624.
- [10] Einstein, Albert, *Out of My Later Years*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1950, p. 249.
- [11] Einstein, Albert, *The World as I See It*, New York: Citadel Press, 1984, p. 90.
- [12] Isaacson, Walter, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007, p. 282.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 292.
- [14] *Ibid.*, pp. 293, 306.
- [15] Einstein, Albert, *Out of My Later Years*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1950, pp. 262-263.
- [16] Segev, Tom, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1993, pp. 161-162.
- [17] *Ibid.*, p. 271.
- [18] Holton, Gerald and Elkana, Yehuda (editors), *Albert Einstein: Historical and Cultural Perspectives*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982, pp. 294-295.
- [19] Sayen, Jamie, *Einstein in America: The Scientist's Conscience in the Age of Hitler and Hiroshima*, New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1985, pp. 145-146.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- [21] Einstein, Albert, *Out of My Later Years*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1950, pp. 201-202.
- [22] Sayen, Jamie, *Einstein in America: The Scientist's Conscience in the Age of Hitler and Hiroshima*, New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1985, p. 146.
- [23] *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- [24] Clark, Ronald W., *Einstein: The Life and Times*, New York and Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1971, p. 601.
- [25] Isaacson, Walter, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007, p. 506.
- [26] Jerome, Fred and Taylor, Rodger, *Einstein on Race and Racism*, New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 2005, p. 105.
- [27] Isaacson, Walter, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007, p. 506.

[28] Born, Max, *The Born-Einstein Letters*, New York: Walker and Company, 1971, p. 199.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

[30] Fölsing, Albrecht, *Albert Einstein: A Biography*, New York: Viking, 1997, p. 659.

[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 683-684.

[32] Neffe, Jürgen, *Einstein: A Biography*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, p. 379.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 380.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 384, 387.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 389.

[36] Lacayo, Richard, *Albert Einstein: The Enduring Legacy of a Modern Genius*, New York: Time Home Entertainment, 2011, pp. 8-9.

[37] Isaacson, Walter, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007, p. 409.

[38] Bjercknes, Christopher Jon, *Albert Einstein: The Incurable Plagiarist*, Downers Grove, Ill.: XTX Inc., 2002, pp. 161-162.

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